

COLLECTIVE FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

Collective Forgiveness and Reconciliation: Applying Forgiveness and Reconciliation to
the Cultural and Societal Level

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Abstract

The author explores definitions and models of forgiveness, as well as the possibility of employing such models in cultural and cross-cultural conflicts. A close examination of Staub, Pearlman, Gubin and Hagengimana's intervention after the Rwanda genocide (1994), as well as the success of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee following apartheid, are presented in support of the hypothesis that such large-scale endeavors to reduce intergroup antipathy through forgiveness and reconciliation are not only possible, but are also effective. The article concludes with the example of the positive effects of the Australian government's public apology to the Aborigines for past injustices, as well as suggestions for further research for social psychologists.

Recently, clinical psychologists have begun to recognize the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation in promoting psychological healing (e.g., Lawler, Younger, Piferi, Jobe, Edmondson & Jones, 2005). However, with few exceptions (see Allan, Allan, Kaminer & Stein, 2006; Staub et al., 2005), there remains a lack of research and literature available on the subject from social psychologists. This is puzzling, since, if such a concept has proven effective on the individual and small-group scale, as clinical psychologists report, it is conceivable that it would also have success on a larger scale (van Noort, 2003). Forgiveness interventions on a cultural and societal scale could, and indeed have, been developed based on models of successful clinical interventions on both the individual and small-group levels. The potential success of these interventions on a larger scale could provide a means for aiding to end intercultural clashes, both within and between countries. An overview of commonly-accepted definitions of forgiveness, benefits of forgiveness reported by clinicians, and factors that influence the forgiveness process, will be explored, before considering the most recent, and commonly used, theories and methods of larger-scale forgiveness endeavors. Application of some of these theories will be explored as the concept of restorative justice is evaluated, along with reports from a forgiveness and reconciliation intervention experiment conducted by social psychologists after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, as well as from the South African Truth and Reconciliation Committee.

A precise, universally-accepted definition of forgiveness has not yet been established by theologians, philosophers or psychologists. However, certain elements remain consistent through all definitions of forgiveness, and most are able to agree on what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not forgetting, nor is it reconciliation, though it may lead to reconciliation. It is not condoning the other's act, indifference to an injustice,

or simply the diminishing of angry feelings across time (Enright, 1992). The restorative justice definition of forgiveness is the experience of “a shift in understanding of the offender, oneself, and the world...[and] is expressed through the transformation of meaning that allows the victim to view both their own experiences and the violating act of another in a different light” (Armour & Umbreit, 2006, p.128). Enright (1992) takes the definition further by asserting that forgiveness is the “overcoming of negative affect and judgment toward the offender, not by denying ourselves the right to such affect and judgment, but by endeavoring to view the offender with compassion, benevolence, and love while recognize that he or she has abandoned the right to them” (p.100). Murray (2002) agrees that it is not a denial of the wrong committed, or of the hurt that results from that wrong, but rather, it is “a decision to understand....It is a gift that is freely and consciously given by an individual who has been hurt so that the cycle of pain could be broken and healthy beginnings can be created” (p. 197). Montiel (2002) states that “Forgiveness entails remembering, not forgetting, the unjust act. But the remembering is experienced without bitterness, and in order to restore justice” (p. 271). Application of this on a larger scale results in a definition of sociopolitical, or collective forgiveness as “arising along with cultural transformations. Atmospheres of revenge and bitterness gradually give way to increased trust and acceptance of difference.” (p. 271). Hargrave (1994) maintains that, before forgiveness can begin, exoneration must occur, where exoneration is defined as the effort of the victim to remove culpability from the offender (Murray, 2002). While not all agree with Enright that forgiveness must entail love being extended between parties, it is agreed that the ideal end of forgiveness is reconciliation, though most would argue that reconciliation is not mandatory for forgiveness. The key

similarity in all of these definitions is that forgiveness requires changes in the victim's cognitions and emotions toward the offender.

Most clinical psychologists would agree that forgiveness is key in restoring psychological health, and that denying forgiveness could have negative effects on the victim. In forgiving, the victim is able to release feelings of revenge and bitterness towards the offender. Clinical evidence has shown that, on the individual level, forgiveness is directly related to reducing anger, blame, vengeful thoughts and feelings, anxiety, depression, and grief; and increasing self-esteem and hope (Armour & Umbreit, 2006; Lawler et al., 2005; Allan et al., 2006; Recine, Werner, & Recine, 2007). Denying forgiveness may lead to not only an increase in the negative feelings mentioned, but also to increased levels of psychopathology and a difficulty in restoring overall mental health (Murray, 2002). Applying these benefits to a larger-scale, one could argue that collective forgiveness could, potentially, break the cycles of violence which are among the leading causes of modern civil wars and genocides. Staub et al., (2005) in their work with the aftermaths of the genocide in Rwanda, noted that "genocide was the end-point of an evolution, with a past history of hostility between groups" (p. 299). Forgiveness has the potential to not only stop this evolution by putting an end to the cycle of violence that fuels it, but also to promote healing and reconciliation between peoples.

Certain factors aid in determining who is more likely to forgive, and what is more likely to be forgiven. A study conducted by Allan et al., (2006) found that women are less likely to forgive than men. This seems to be supported by McLernon, Cairns, Hewstone & Smith's 2004 study, which found that women in Northern Ireland who had experienced verbal or physical injury or bereavement due to the political violence had relatively low forgiveness rates. They also note that previous studies have suggested that younger

people are less willing to forgive than older people. Allan and colleagues suggest that the gender difference for forgiveness may be related to whether the wrong was committed against the women themselves, or against their families. “As men generally had to forgive wrongdoers who had violated them, it may have been easier for them to forgive than it was for the women...who generally had to forgive the wrongdoers who had violated a family member” (Allan et al., 2006, p. 98). Clinical psychologists note that women accused of the murder of a spouse often do not commit the act out of revenge for themselves. Rather, the murder was connected to the realization of not wanting their children to be treated as they had (van Noort, 2003, p. 480). Theoretically, it is conceivable that, on a larger scale, women are more likely than men to hold on to and perpetuate collective memories of past wrongs experienced against a given people group in order to “protect” the next generation from having to experience the same pain. These collective memories are kept alive and passed down through the generations, fueling the cycle of violence. As Gibson (2006) notes, “Truth is conceptualized and operationalized as the degree of individual acceptance of the collective memory” (p. 413). The collective memory of these wrongdoings act as a testimony to the character of the offenders, making more justifiable the taking of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; that is, allowing revenge to become justified.

What the offender says and does after committing the offense can greatly influence the forgiveness process. Those who believe their offenders to be truly sorry for the wrongs committed were more likely to forgive (Allan et al., 2006). Another factor in determining forgiveness lay in the act itself. Studies have shown that forgiveness is easier if the consequences of the act lessen over time (McLernon et al., 2004; Staub et al., 2005; van Noort, 2003; Gibson, 2006). Despite these and other factors which may influence the

forgiveness process, they do not completely hinder the process. The journey may be longer, but the possibility still remains if the right approach is taken at the right time.

An individual's life is not completely independent of the society around it; lives are simultaneously individual and social, and usually what an individual accepts as truth and knowledge is determined by the society in which the individual lives (de la Rey & Owens, 1998). Because of this, collective trauma requires healing at the community level; that is, collective healing. To provide this, aspects of the healing process, such as forgiveness, need to be better understood. In an attempt to better understand this process, models of forgiveness have been developed. Hargrave (1994) distinguishes between exoneration and forgiveness, arguing that exoneration must take place before forgiveness can occur. Exoneration is defined by Hargrave as the effort of the victim to remove culpability from the offender, while forgiveness is the promise to refrain from retaliation and work towards a mutual understanding and harmony in the future (Murray, 2002). Exoneration is the foundation for the first two of Hargrave's four stations of forgiveness. Station one is insight, in which the victim gains understanding into the dynamics and phenomena that caused the damage, as well as reduce the drain on any remaining, if any, trust resources. Station two calls for understanding, where the victim removes culpability of the offender, understanding the offender's limitation, efforts and intent, and realizing that if the roles had been reversed, the victim may have behaved in the same manner that the offender did. Victim understanding helps to answer the question of why, and can help in removing condemnation and blame. "A wrongdoer who is understood, no matter how awful the act...may [help the victim] feel less defensive and less subservient" (Murray, 2002, p. 192). Station three requires providing an opportunity for compensation. de la Rey and Owens (1998), in evaluating the success and significance of South Africa's

Truth and Reconciliation Committee, point out how symbolizing the experience of pain and suffering is important in healing. Compensation, such as reparations, is a form of such symbolism. The reparations do not specifically refer to financial compensation, but rather, any type of aid that acknowledges the damage done and that is aimed at repairing that damage. Finally, station four of Hargrave's model is the actual act of forgiveness. Up until this point, all attention is focused on the single point in time in which the offense occurred. Forgiveness entails accepting and moving past that point in time with a willingness to face the future in light of the wrongdoing that transpired. To date, Hargrave's model has proven very effective in family and small-group counseling (Murray, 2002).

The cognitive development model was developed by Enright et al (1989) after studying perceptions of how certain conditions can make it easier to forgive. Modeled in the classical Kohlbergian fashion, forgiveness is measured by a way of hierarchy, or styles. The two lowest styles, Enright argues, distort forgiveness because of justice needs. "Something is required from the offender before forgiveness is granted" (p. 104). The two middle styles suggest that forgiveness is given only under social pressures. The fifth style has forgiveness occurring due to social pressures, but with the additional expectation that some specific condition must occur afterwards, such as the restoration of social harmony. Only the sixth style represents true forgiveness, that is, forgiveness without prerequisites or expectations of benefit, based only on unconditional moral love. For this model, progression to the next style level requires a developmental advance, where the cognition and reasoning processes become increasingly more complex (Enright & Gassin, 1992).

The process model of forgiveness (Enright et al., 1992) portrays forgiveness as a journey rather than as stages or a hierarchy, taking into consideration not only the cognitive, but also the affective and behavioral components. Enright's process model occurs in 16 units, noting that not all individuals will experience all of the units, and that others may have to return to various units several times before they can be worked through and forgiveness achieved. Unit 1 requires the victim to recognize and examine the defense mechanisms used to mask the pain caused by the injury. Unit 2 sees the pain that was released by unit one's examination turning into anger. Units 3 through 7 have the other psychological repercussions of victimhood occurring, such as shame, depression, anxiety and flashbacks. Often, a sense of the unfairness of the world will arise. In units 8 through 10, the victim makes a decision to change the current situation. A conscious decision is made on the intellectual level to at least attempt to forgive the offender. Unit 11 begins the reframing process, in which the victim begins to consider other influences that may have affected the offender, trying to understand the offender, and beginning to see them in a different light. This leads to unit 12, in which empathy is developed by the victim towards the offender. Empathy leads to compassion, unit 13, which makes the acceptance of pain possible, unit 14. Units 15 and 16 help the victim to understand that both their offender and themselves are imperfect beings. These 16 units help to decrease negative affect towards the offender, which indicates that forgiveness is occurring (Enright & Gassin, 1992).

Both of Enright's models are examples of developmental models of forgiveness. However, when using developmental models, forgiveness must be based on mercy, and the willingness to relinquish the rights to personal justice. "In forgiving, we go beyond seeking a fair solution and instead look for a compassionate solution" (Enright & Gassin,

1992, p.104). Enright perceives justice as the restoration of equality where inequality exists; forgiveness does not restore this equality, but rather, recognizes the equality of both victim and offender as equal members of the human existence. This membership exists before, during and after the wrongful event; the commonality of humanity was never taken away to begin with, therefore there is no inequality to restore. “Forgiveness helps us recognize that such equality [humanity] has existed unconditionally and will continue to exist regardless of one person’s behavior towards another” (p. 102).

The final model of forgiveness explored comes not from a psychologist, but rather from a theologian and historian by the name of J. D. Roth. Roth (2007) argues that the reason forgiveness does not seem to work as often as it should is because people are too concerned about healing the past and compensating for past wrongs, that one never moves into the future. Forgiveness, and thus healing, begins not when the past is compensated for, but rather when it is correctly remembered. All previous models discussed articulate the need for the victim to identify with their offender on a basic human level, as well as the need to understand the circumstances and phenomena surrounding the victim before and at the time of the harmful action. Correct remembering requires that both parties involved accurately and honestly remember and recount the events that took place leading up to, and during, the event. Injustices and atrocities of both parties are brought to light, permitting all involved to see the continuing cycle of violence and its repercussions. Such admissions allow for a true, accurate collective history of the event, in which the stories of both sides are equally considered and understood.

As many researchers have noted, collective memory and collective forgiveness are essential concepts when speaking of large-scale offenses and atrocities. Collective

memory determines a people's understanding and view of truth. Middleton and Edwards (1990) noted that, "in the contest between varying accounts of shared experiences, people reinterpret and discover features of the past that become the context and content for what they will jointly recall and commemorate on future occasions" (de la Rey & Owens, 1998, 260). In his evaluation of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee, Gibson (2006) points out that creating a collective memory that is acceptable to all can release a society from obsessions with past wrongs. Montiel (2002) firmly asserts that "A joint acceptance of historical narratives helps prevent the eruption of future conflicts fueled by collective myths of victimization and societal rage" (p. 276). By remembering correctly, past injustices from both sides are confronted in all their ugliness and horror, and are understood as each having spawned the other. Correct remembering, it could be argued, is present in all three previously mentioned forgiveness models in one form or another. Though Roth's theory can only be applied successfully in large-scale scenarios because of its nature, an example of how it could be implemented can be seen in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee, where all sides the conflict were brought to light

To date, there have been four commonly-accepted methods of measurement developed for forgiveness, namely, those by Mauger et al (1992), Hargrave and Sells (1997), and Enright, Rique, and Colye (2000) (Allan et al., 2006). One or more of these measurements were, or are currently, used in the following three examples of the application of forgiveness intervention on a societal scale.

Restorative justice is a philosophical approach to crime that utilizes forgiveness in order to repair harm that was done to not only the victim, but also to the community. Its roots are found in the Native traditions that view healing and living in harmony as the basis needed for the restoration of any relationship. The community is responsible for the

well being of both the victim and the offender. Contemporary North American societies use the practice in the hopes of achieving three goals; firstly, to elevate the role of victims, which includes the community in which the victim lives; secondly, to hold the offender directly accountable to the victims; and thirdly, to restore the loss (emotional and/or material) of victims by employing dialogue, negotiation and problem solving between the victim and offender (Armour & Umbreit, 2006). The success of restorative justice is seen mainly in minor crimes, such as theft, arson and vandalism, rather than in serious offences such as rape, murder or assault. This could be, in part, due to the individualistic nature of North American culture, as opposed to the collectivistic Native culture. Armour and Umbreit describe how anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1976) views the greatest difference between individualistic and collectivistic cultures are in the notions of shame and guilt. Individualistic cultures, such as North America, are guilt cultures, guided by a personal conscience that acts as an internal guide. People who do not follow the rules of the culture experience negative affect due to a transgression against their own personal conscience, which results in guilt. Collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, such as traditional Native and Asian cultures, are shame cultures. The group, not the individual, is held responsible for any given action out of a collective obligation, and thus, the group feels the shame of any transgression. Thus, the group experiences shame rather than only the individual (Armour & Umbreit, 2006).

Though the concept of restorative justice may have some potential for promoting intergroup forgiveness and reconciliation (intergroup meaning between a community and its members), there does not seem to be much potential in implementing it in cross-cultural settings. The key problem lies in the mutual cooperation needed between victim

and offender in order for the forgiveness process to begin. Both parties must agree to participate, or else the forgiveness and reconciliation process cannot even be attempted.

Staub et al. (2005) were a group of social and clinical psychologists who worked in Rwanda implementing forgiveness interventions after the 1994 genocide. Throughout the course of their work, they conducted a study to see if they could evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, and thus of forgiveness, in such settings as post-genocide circumstances, especially when the two opposing sides still lived within relatively close proximity of one another (sometimes still within the same village). Three groups were established; the experimental group, treatment control group, and the no-treatment control group. The experimental group included conditions in which the group facilitators attended a nine-day training seminar that explained about the origins of genocide, psychological trauma and healing from such horrific events, as well as education about basic human needs, and the effects that genocide can have on those needs. These facilitators integrated the knowledge and techniques they learned at this seminar with their own traditional techniques, using this integrated approach with the community groups they led. The treatment control group received no additional training and used only the subjects' traditional, customary approaches and techniques. The no-treatment group had no facilitator and received no treatment. The effects of the treatments were not evaluated based on those who had attended the seminar, but rather, by the member of the community groups they lead. The majority of community group participants (75%) were women, largely due to post-conflict population imbalance (that is, the population was greatly unbalanced in men to women ratio due to the genocide and guerrilla warfare), and the groups themselves were comprised of an average of 16 people of both Hutu and Tutsi descents. It was found that participants in the integrated group

reported fewer trauma symptoms at the end of the treatments, 2 months later participants in the integrated group demonstrated a significantly more positive understanding and higher toleration to members of the opposite ethnic group, than participants in the other two experimental groups. In fact, 2 months after the treatment ended, members of the treatment control group and the no-treatment control group demonstrated no change in negative perceptions held of the opposite ethnic group. The results of this study provide compelling evidence that allowing for understanding of both the circumstances surrounding the event, as well as the circumstances of those involved, are essential in promoting forgiveness. It also provides evidence that collective forgiveness on a cultural level is possible if those involved are helped in understanding cause of the events as the outcome of human actions, rather than of evil.

The largest, most successful and internationally known intervention of forgiveness and reconciliation is South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC). Formed in 1995 after the end of the apartheid, individuals from any side who felt they were a victim of the post-apartheid violence could come forwards and give their account to the TRC. Likewise, offenders could give testimony of the wrongs they committed and request amnesty from prosecution in return for that testimony. In 1998, the committee presented its report to the public and international community, where all sides were found equally guilty, and therefore were equally responsible for the atrocities committed. This finding proved to have a landmark effect on the South African people, and is often cited as the main reason democracy succeeded and violence began to subside in the country (Gibson, 2006). One of the reasons researchers believe the TRC had been so successful is that the process was able to capture the attention of the average South African, a crucial element when dealing with human rights violations and injustices on

collective levels. Gibson directly articulates the opinion of many political scientists, sociologists and psychologists who study the TRC when stating that “many observers throughout the world subscribe to the view that the truth process did indeed contribute to reconciliation in South Africa and that reconciliation has been a crucial factor in moving the country toward a more peaceful and democratic future” (Gibson, 2006, p. 410).

Sharing the responsibility, blame and victimhood created a common identity for many South Africans, allowing for the creation of a collective history, true to all sides involved. However, people must pay attention in order for a collective memory to change society, something the TRC managed to achieve. In effect, the TRC allowed for right remembering to occur on both a cultural and individual level for those involved.

Although amnesty was granted to many human rights violators, the justice generated by the TRC satisfied the collective and individual need (Gibson, 2006). The cycle of violence began to break once a commonality was found between the sides involved, then publicized to all, that being their shared humanity and joint sufferings as part of the human condition.

A small side note should also be made in regards to the progress made between the Australian government and Australian Native population. On February 13, 2008, the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, issued an apology to the Aborigines on behalf of the government for the injustices of the past, accepting collective guilt for those trespasses. Interestingly, it is the first time in Australian history that the parliament passed a motion with 100% support. Aborigines report that the apology has lessened much tension that has existed between the natives and the government in the past generation or two (Australian apology to Aborigines, 2008). Though tension remains about the issue of compensation, it is the best progress the Australian government has

been able to make in reconciling with the Aborigines. It would be interesting to note if the Canadian government would see similar tension reduction among its Native population if a similar apology were to be issued with the support of all government parties.

Such a modest overview could not begin to do justice to the topic at hand. Much more research is needed in the area, as well as looking at how a reduction of scapegoating, prejudice and stereotyping may impact forgiveness, and vice versa. A closer examination of factors that both promote and hinder forgiveness, as well as different methods and techniques needed for different cultures are also required. Longitudinal studies are needed to see if forgiveness intervention programs, such as those conducted in Rwanda and by the TRC, remain effective. Education is needed to instill empathy and compassion into children and adolescents now, in order to increase the occurrence of forgiveness in the future, and perhaps even reduce future conflict. Empathy and compassion appear to bring about more advanced interpersonal problem-solving skills, because it allows the individual to examine the problem from both sides, reducing the likelihood of acting out of one-sided impulse. Although practices such as collective forgiveness may not end all conflict, it certainly has proven itself effective in helping to end some conflicts, and in promoting more peaceful relations between conflict groups in the future.

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